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PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTV #1211/01 1581327
ZNR UUUUU ZZH (CCY AD9F1734 WSC0766-695)
P 061327Z JUN 08
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7021
INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM 9872

UNCLAS TEL AVIV 001211

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y C A P T I O N
DEPT FOR NEA/REA and OES/ENV
USDA FOR FAS/OCBD/DRDAD
AMMAN FOR ESTH - BHALLA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: SENV EAGR IS PA JO
SUBJ: ISRAELI CABINET APPROVES EMERGENCY WATER PLAN

Ref: (A) TelAviv 242 B) TelAviv 678

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The GOI approved new emergency actions on June 1 to address the country's water shortage. Agriculture was cut by 40 percent in its allocation, and an extensive (and expensive) public conservation program was approved. Major investments totaling billions of shekels over coming years in wastewater treatment and desalination capacity were announced. An inter-ministerial team will now work on water issues in an effort to minimize the bureaucratic squabbles that have previously hindered Israeli efforts. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Israel's cabinet approved the proposed emergency plan submitted by Infrastructure Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer to deal with Israel's water crisis. The plan, prepared by the Israel Authority for Water and Sewage, addresses both short-term (2008-2009) and long-term measures required to ensure the quantity and quality of Israel's water supply until about 2020). The plan has four main parts.

¶3. (U) First, the emergency plan allocates NIS 120 million (USD 36 million) to encourage water conservation. These funds target both consumer practices and corporate users, in an attempt to encourage more effective water usage and thereby increase the overall availability of water in the short term. Higher water fees - giving users the incentive to save water -- are another component of demand management, as is cutting water allocations for public gardens use by local authorities, cutting the allocation of national supply to the agricultural sector, and increasing inspection and enforcement activity.

¶4. (U) Second, the emergency plan allocates NIS 915 million (USD 275 million) to upgrade old and construct new plants to treat waste water over in the next five years. Each cubic meter of water recycled is one less that must be pumped or desalinated. This action covers short and medium term needs.

¶5. (U) Third, the plan establishes the medium term goal of increasing the quantity of desalinated water in Israel to 750 million cubic meters (mcm) a year: 600 mcm by 2013 and 100 mcm more by 2020. Today 138 mcm are desalinated in Israel between the Ashkelon and Palmahim plants, and 100 mcm more is under construction in the Hadera plant. (This expands on the GOI decision made last August to increase the quantity of desalinated water to 505 mcm a year.)

¶6. (U) Fourth, the action program establishes an inter-ministerial team to handle the actions proposed above efficiently and quickly, including implementing the needed statutory processes to build and expand the water infrastructure in Israel. Heading the team will be the director of the State Authority for Water and Sewage. Other on the team will be representatives of the Interior Ministry's Planning Administration, the Finance Ministry, the Israel Lands

Administration, the Justice Ministry, and the National Infrastructure Ministry.

¶7. (SBU) As post reported previously (reftels), the winter of 2007-2008 was extremely dry and the average rainfall was about 65% of the annual average. The situation in the basin of the Sea of Galilee and in the mountain region is particularly bad -- the average rainfall there was less than 60% of the annual average. The national water carrier Mekorot has ceased tapping the Sea since January, but its water level has risen by only six centimeters during the spring run-off period, and at the moment is at a level of less than half a meter above the red line - the level at which it is ecologically harmful to withdraw water. Despite the probability of such a dry year coming on top of four straight years of drought being only 2%, i.e., once in 50 years, this is indeed what has happened. This year the level of the Sea of Galilee will drop to almost a meter below the red line.

¶8. (SBU) Comment: The inter-ministerial committee may be the most important feature of the emergency program, as bureaucratic confrontation is partly to blame for the present predicament. In 2001, expansion of desalination capacity was agreed on, but the Finance Ministry (supported by others) opted to delay allocating funds for it as that winter's rains were plentiful. Getting Finance, Lands Administration, Infrastructure, and Justice behind the same policy will help speed implementation of desalination and gray-water treatment actions. On June 1, the inter-ministerial tender committee asked the three desalination operators in Ashkelon, Palmahim, and Hadera to submit bids for expanding the plants. Previous bidding requests have been challenged on legal grounds that questioned the competitiveness and openness of favoring the existing operators. Reportedly, a deputy to the accountant general in the Finance Ministry did thorough staff work to examine the economic, legal, engineering and statutory aspects necessary to carry out the decision. Avoiding bureaucratic delays will be key to accomplishing the objectives of the water action program.

JONES